

Conrad the Writer

JAMES B. CONNOLLY

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JOSEPH CONRAD KORZENIOWSKI lived into his sixty-eighth year. The first quarter of his life was spent at his home in Poland, the second quarter at sea—as a seafaring man in English ships mostly. The last half of his life he put in as a writing man ashore.

The boy Conrad was none of your wild ones who leave good homes to run away to sea. He was a dutiful boy who liked his people, a studious boy who got good marks in school. When he made up his mind he was going to sea, he told his home people so. When they did not like it, he patiently awaited until they gave consent.

Thus far it looks as if the sea were Conrad's true vocation; but not so. At thirty he begins to write a novel in English, and at thirty-five, being then a captain in the English merchant service, he gave up the sea to settle down in England as a writing man.

His first novel, "Almayer's Folly," is not a sea tale at all. There were seascapes here and there in it and a sea character or two sketched into it, but the story is almost entirely of shore-going folk, and nearly all the action takes place ashore. Only a small proportion of Conrad's tales are of the sea though nearly all have a sea background.

There was much violent and quiet crime in his first tale—deaths by knife and pistol and drowning. His next story was also full of murder and lust and all manner of evil doings. Almost every novel he ever wrote had all sorts of killing in it, for which some lily-fingered critics have sniffed at him, forgetting that the pages of Homer, Dante and Shakespeare are crowded with similar doings, that the stories which have lived through the ages are stories of men and women of strong passions, battling for one thing or another which they very much desire.

For a long time Conrad got small profit from his writing, which puzzled him, who had come to a land where,

as he thought, good writing was well rewarded. He knew he could write, intelligent friends were assuring him that he could write, yet he was making slow headway with the reading public. He had trouble for years to find publishers. One would try him and pass him on; another, and so on. Public and publishers were both passing him up. Doubtless he was told he would have to alter his diction and shift his viewpoint if he wished to make a popular writer of himself. He must have had his bitter thoughts when he wrote:

To go undeterred by faltering, weariness or reproach, is the only valid justification for the worker in prose. And if his conscience is clear, his answer to those who in the fullness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edited, consoled or amused; who demand to be promptly improved or encouraged, or frightened or shocked, or charmed must run thus: My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written work to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

The foregoing was written as a preface to one of his earlier books, but not printed therein because, as all publishers very well know, only an author who has arrived may talk back. Only in the last edition of his books before he died was that preface printed.

Appeal, explanation, defiance, contempt, ring out from those lines; and a little something more. Consider one line: "If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts." Some will see therein only extreme intellectual arrogance, others only the unquenchable determination of the writer who is conscious of a God-given gift.

At twenty years of age Conrad could not write a sentence in English. Landing then in England, a sailor in a strange port, he began to grope for mastery of the language.

Conrad, the stranger groping for the right way, fell for the word theory early. In his "Personal Record," written when he was famous, he sets down:

You perceive the force of a word. He who wants to persuade

should put his trust not in the right argument, but in the right word. . . Such words as glory for instance, or pity. I won't mention any more. They are not far to seek. Shouted with perseverance, with conviction, these two by their sound alone have set whole nations in motion and upheaved the dry, hard ground on which rests our whole social fabric. Of course, the accent must be attended to. The right accent. That's very important. The capacious lungs, the thundering or the tender vocal cords. Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world. . . What a dream for a writer! Let me only find the right word! Surely it must be lying somewhere among the wreckage of all the plaints and all the exultations poured out aloud since the first day when hope, the undying, came down on earth.

There is a mocking thread woven into that, as if the man who had been so assiduously substituting words for thought, had at last caught the echo of a resounding falsity and is easing his conscience by a jibe at his own old practice.

From the word he passed on to an apprentice to the phrase; and because he had more imagination, more intellect, because he was what he was, heir to an older culture and a longer line of intelligence, he outstripped his masters. From half a dozen Conrad books at my elbow, I pick, not exactly at random but casually enough too, the following:

The open water of the avant-port glitters under the moon as if sown over with millions of sequins, and the long white breakwater shines like a thick bar of solid silver. With a quick rattle of blocks and one single silky swish, the sail is filled by a little breeze keen enough to have come straight down from the frozen moon, and the boat, after the clatter of the hauled-in sweeps, seems to stand at rest, surrounded by a mysterious whispering so faint and unearthly that it may be the rustling of the brilliant, overpowering moon rays breaking like a rain shower upon the hard, smooth, shadowless sea.

Conrad's book volumes are packed with such gems, though most of them run more to warm color than does that one.

A sailor in a foreign port will always hurry up the street to hear what any big noise is about. The big bally-

hoo in literary England when our Polish boy was beginning to find his way about, was for a group headed by Henry James. When the final awards are handed out, H. James will surely get the chaplet for the circumlocutory championship. A direct, forward statement would probably have been termed a banality by James. . . .

Story, drama,—people who did something or arrived somewhere—that was not the thing. No, no, no! The thing, the only thing that could matter, lay entirely within yourself. One imagined a group of people of the right sort, one placed them in the proper environment, and having so imagined and placed them, one contemplated them, one reflected upon them—intensely, endlessly, reflected upon them. One imagined their speech and actions—thought and speech being, however, much more vital than any possible action could be—and one set down one's emotional and intellectual reactions to the imagined speech and actions of the fictional characters. In this manner one might hope, after years of intensive practise, to achieve a supreme work of art.

They were a curious crew, seeming to know no kind of common, ordinary everyday people, unless it might be the servants in big houses—well-trained servants, who very well knew their proper place in the social scheme of the novel. In their stories, or what they termed stories, the manner was the thing. They polished their phrases until all the casual reader could see was the polish.

Flaubert in France was the apostle of most of them, that same Flaubert who waited seven hours—or was it seven weeks—for the one right, precious word, and who is now remembered only as the uncle of Maupassant and the author of a tale of an adulterous wife which people mostly read in the hope of the smut they will find therein.

The diction of most of these people was quite nice; which did not restrain them at times from hinting of unprintable things. "In The Turn of the Screw," Henry James handles a moral horror. In that book he has a united company of presumably well-bred men and women sit before a fire in a country house and calmly listen to the reading of it.

These writers seemed incapable of picturing a virile man. One now and then would be gentle and kindly, but

he would also be emasculate. Most of them saw life from out of a sort of twilight. Or through a haze, but never the lovely haze which any clear-eyed man may often see on faraway hills on a beautiful day; rather a bilious haze as a man having something the matter with his eyes would see it through yellow glasses.

Semi-allied with these were the crew who were fond of calling themselves realists; who were not half so real as they were degenerate. Some of them preached paganism and, in the belief of many, practised its unholiest rites.

Pretty good proof of Conrad's native cleanliness of mind is that he met such people daily, knew some of them intimately, and yet never absorbed the taint of their vicious obsessions. A touch of pessimism in him may be charged up to these literary associates; no odor of their rotting decadence ever clung to his clothes.

These molders of Conrad's literary manner had a hard, sterile culture, of the intellect almost entirely. Conrad had a rarer culture, that of soul and heart as well as brain. They had a code of manners; he had manners and morals both. They were sensitive to physical beauty, he to physical and moral beauty. He came of people who had given up material for spiritual standards. He had inherited an intense sense of devotion to a cause which when transferred to his daily duty produced such results as no mere materialist could hope to equal.

In his "Personal Record" he tells what the writing of "Nostromo" took out of him:

For twenty months, neglecting the common joys that fall to the lot of the humblest on this earth, I had, like the prophet of old, "wrestled with the Lord," for my creation, for the headlands of the coast, for the darkness of the Placid Gulf, the light on the snows, the clouds in the sky, and for the breath of life that had to be blown into the shapes of men and women. These are perhaps strong words, but it is difficult otherwise to explain the intimacy and strain of a creative effort in which mind and will and conscience are engaged to the full, hour after hour, day after day, away from the world, and to the exclusion of all that makes life really lovable and gentle.

There is a heroic quality in the man who can punish himself like that for twenty months at a stretch. A friend of Conrad's tells the story of how he has seen him lie

down on the rug and cry as he thought of the torture of the day's work before him.

After "Almayer's Folly" and the "Nigger of the Narcissus," which were rather straight-forwardly told stories, Conrad fell under the literary influence of the precious crew a while ago spoken of and wrote the book which floated him from the sea of semi-obscurity into the safe dry-dock of loud acclaim. The reason for the acclaim is simple enough to understand. "Lord Jim" is written around an idea which has always proved sure-fire hokum with an English public. The idea is that an Englishman may sink pretty low, but however low he sinks there is always within him the germ of regeneration.

The loud acclaim did not come from the English public. The English public did not read "Lord Jim" at all. They are not reading him yet. It is too difficult. It was the intelligencia, the leaders of English propaganda, who so highly approved "Lord Jim." (There was also the approval of the honest craftsmen who knew what good work was.) With that approval all the minor agencies in the Empire and in the colonies, all the little molders of opinion in libraries, schools, and the newspaper world went into automatonical action; and in no country, not even in any British colony, is that approval more powerfully felt than in this country. It is not so long since a self-appointed literary committee, conferring upon itself also the power to name annually the best American short stories of the year, granting money prizes for their selections and publish the same in yearly volumes,—it is not so long since they awarded first prize money to a most dully told and drab story for no other reason that writing men can see than that it also proclaims that unquenchable saving quality in a child of English blood. Anglo-Saxon they term it.

"Lord Jim" is at once a notable and terrible book. Half a dozen people take pen in hand or raise a voice to relate the story. There is the directly told first part by the omniscient author, and then the indirect telling by the author's stalking horse, the ratiocinative Marlow. There is the telling by entire letters, by quotations from letters, the telling by people who saw this or that done, or who knew people who saw it done. Half a dozen

Eastern ports are requisitioned to furnish background for the telling of it.

In this manner of telling the story some reviewers have detected a powerful genius impatient of form. A sophomoric conclusion: Conrad chose to tell "Lord Jim" in the way he did because that was the best way he knew to tell it, to invest it with an air of having been told just so and at the same time include pen sketches of out-of-the-ordinary characters and places he had met with in the East. The progress of the story could go hang so long as he could get into the record his impressions of merchant mates and captains, of naval officers and traders, filibusters and rajahs; of somber, sluggish rivers and interior native villages.

"Lord Jim" is the story of an Englishman who was all ego, fond of picturing himself a great hero, but who twice, when tested, showed the instinctive coward in him. As a ship's officer he quit his ship when he thought she was sinking in the night, abandoning several hundred poor passengers to what looked like certain death. The ship does not sink. She is picked up, towed to port. The truth comes out. Our hero is disgraced. The remainder of the story is of how Lord Jim strove to rehabilitate himself in his own eyes.

"Lord Jim" brought in more fame than money, and Conrad needed money. He had married, a family was in prospect and he was still very poor. Chaps not fit to do his typewriting were turning out best sellers. He preferred honest work and short rations himself, but a man may be willing to starve himself and not enjoy having his family starve. He gratefully accepted the aid which came his way through the intelligencia, who had early noted his quality and had been keeping their eye on him.

Conrad took his pension and wrote "Nostromo" around an idea which may or may not have been given him by the intelligencia, but which surely must have pleased them. "Nostromo" is the story of English mining interests to survive a revolution in South America. Recall all the novels you have ever read with such a theme, the incapable, villainous natives, the heroic northerners, the final triumph of the righteous engineers or miners or whatever they are and so on. Conrad wrote a big book, even though

it had many of "Lord Jim's" faults. A plotted chronology of its action looks like a night nurse's chart of a chills and fever patient when he is feeling real bad, but it was a great job for all of that, the biggest thing he ever did before or since, even though he characteristically forgets all about the progress or direction of his story while he weaves in his scores of character sketches and thousands of precious words.

The story did not go so well. The reason is simple enough here also. It is an English belief, the same long nourished by propaganda, that the Latins are an inferior lot. Countless mediocre novelists have made best sellers of their books by exploiting that idea alone. Conrad did not play up to the safe old legend. He did set down some despicable Latins, but he also set down some great ones. He has three priests in it, of whom two are good men, which is a facer in itself. According to the old non-Conformist formula, all Latin priests should have been oily, intriguing, and corrupt. And he failed to exalt the English mine owner, who, of course, should have been the hero of the book, but is not. The central figure in the book is an Italian, the magnificent *capataz de cargadores*—longshore boss we would say in English. Another Italian, old Viola, stands out like a lighthouse of incorruptibility and selflessness.

The intelligencia held one foot on the soft pedal when mentioning "Nostromo." The honest little agents, the intellectual slaves who did not know that they were such, rushed forth with their good words, but the purely loyal ones waited for the official word. In due time came the reviews. . . . A failure. . . . Astonishing *but*. . . and so on and so on. Conrad could not understand why people who praised "Lord Jim" could see nothing in "Nostromo": or he pretended he could not. I doubt myself if that subtle intelligence of his was fooled even in those early days. However, the surprising adverse reviews gave him an excuse to write some embittered retorts.

Conrad turned out several books of short stories. He never mastered the short story. He was naturally too slow in action, too much in love with his beautiful phrases to sacrifice them to the progress of the tale; a great story

teller will never use a diction that he cannot handle easily—it must resemble his own living speech; and no one could ever talk as Conrad wrote, not even Conrad himself. He did one short thing, "Youth," which is great; a wonder of colorful description and first-class narration. Inject a dramatic motive, a clashing of human interests into "Youth," and it would remain one of the short stories of all time. As it is, it remains a superb sketch.

The novels of his intermediate years are pretty much like "Lord Jim," too much introspection and retrospection, too little drama, too much fine writing for its own sake. Conrad never had the urge to brush aside the verbiage, the surgical courage to use the knife on the dead spots. He never saw his story as a whole, being in that way as weak as those sloppy scribblers, who tell interviewers how they really have not the slightest idea when they sit down to write of where or how the story will end. Conrad is never sloppy: he is always the thinker. But merely to think is not to ensure a great novel; a novelist should think to the point.

Before he died Conrad did two books, "The Rover" and "Arrow of Gold," that are not loaded to the Plimsoll mark with dead cargo. He charts his course before he sets sail and he steers a fairly straight course. In these two books he also goes back to the people he met in his youth, in that period between leaving home and taking up with the English merchant ships.

It is instructive to see the effect on him of a mental change of scene. First of all, he is less vaporish. He writes more to the point, his characters are more human, more vigorous, less pessimistic. They are altogether in a happier mood.

Any man who has knocked about the world would hesitate, I think, to choose any of Conrad's English heroes for a campaign chum; but what man would not like to have sat and looked out to sea and talked with old Peyrol, the Rover? Or Dominic of the "Arrow of Gold?" It is Peyrol who, having grown to love a young French woman and coming to see that she loves a young French naval officer, coolly plans to substitute himself for the young officer in an expedition that is certain to end in his death. There is no heroic pose so that the two young people

shall be aware of his sacrifice; no consuming egotism to satisfy. He just goes and does it because it is his nature to do it so, to sacrifice himself without fuss.

Compare our feeling for the Frenchman Peyrol with the English Captain Anthony in "Chance." Anthony, who has come to believe that his wife no longer loves him, which by the way isn't quite so, lets himself get lost in the wreck of his ship. A great sacrifice, yes; but already Conrad had so completely wrapped him up in vacillations, impotencies and self-examinations that we feel no great regret when he goes. Old Peyrol reasons everything out, acts decisively; Anthony sort of muddles along. Anthony is an impeccable character, Peyrol, an ex-vagabond of the sea; yet we regret Peyrol, not Anthony.

There is Lord Jim: We begin by pitying him for his constitutional timidity. We grow to despise him for his endless talk to minimize his appearance of cowardice. He blames everything but his own infirmity. One of Peyrol's or Dominic's crew in a similar case—if we can imagine that—would have simply said: "Oh, what's the use trying to explain? I quit. Let it go at that. What is the sentence?" Conrad has Lord Jim abandon the girl who loves him and whom he loves (if he can really love anything but his own opinion of himself), abandon her to a devastating future while he chooses a death which serves no purpose except to minister to his own self-esteem. Conrad, doing the best he can to make a hero of Jim, says he is answering the call of his exalted egotism. Anthony, another egotist, is overwhelmed by the thoughts of his own misfortune.

Egotism, impotency, materialism—Conrad writes these things all over his English pages. He clothes them with unfailing sympathy, but I have always doubted if they were the real children of his heart. He will not allow them spiritual fortitude.

I have heard Englishmen extol Charles Gould, manager of the San Tome mine in "Nostromo," as a characteristically fine specimen of the progressive, adventurous English business man among a crowd of slack Latins. They speak of his unpretentious courage, his unwavering loyalty, steadfast adherence to a great purpose, without seeming able to see that self-righteousness which he also does not

seem to see he has. Throughout his pages Conrad gives us Englishmen who cannot see themselves as others see them. He does it so frequently that we are compelled to believe that he thereby means to emphasize a racial defect. He has Gould doing business with grafters, yet holding scorn for them without any scorn whatever for himself. Gould has a wife, a good woman.

"He refused to discuss the ethical view with his wife. He trusted that, though a little disenchanted, she would be intelligent enough to understand."

The big financier behind Gould is Holroyd. Conrad, after a casual snapshot at the evangelical missionaries who are the forerunners of big trade, takes more careful aim at Holroyd. . . .

In the "End of the Tether" Conrad makes us acquainted with a fine type of ship captain, an upright-living man, the soul of honor—until the great test comes. The old fellow has a married daughter who is always after him for money. To satisfy her demands he commits barratry; that is, he wrecks his ship to get the insurance.

In a chapter in his "Mirror of the Sea" he eulogizes Nelson and the British Navy of the past. It is a fine chapter, a noble and deserved tribute; but it is the Past not the Present he praises.

In Captain Lingard of "The Rescue" we seem to have at last an honest, virile hero; but he, too, fails in the end. Two Malay friends (to whom he has given his word) are killed while he philanders with another man's wife. They all crack under pressure.

The last paragraph of the "Nigger of the Narcissus" is:

"You were a good crowd. A good crowd as ever fisted with wild cries the beating canvas of a heavy fore-sail; or tossing aloft, invisible in the night, gave back yell for yell to a westerly gale."

It sounds fine but it is not Conrad. It is more like some publisher's reader in an inspired moment trying to write like a hearty seafaring man, which Conrad never is. Not hearty, no! I can imagine the poverty stricken Conrad being asked by his publishers to say a few kind words for the crew of the *Narcissus*—to help the book sales—and he, in a burst of depression, conceiving the sardonic idea

of sitting down and writing that banal peroration.

The 170 pages preceding that final paragraph are a denial of it. Every page in the book except that last one makes out that same "good as ever" crowd to be the sorry lot—cowardly, obscene, treacherous, physically inept. The one decent man in the crew, old Singleton, is stupid as can be under his imposing front. The only man aboard with any brains is the darkey, James Waitt and he uses his brains to bluff the crew into waiting upon him hand and foot, even to grow mutinous in his cause.

The hopeless outlook is so prevalent as to make us wonder if the imaginative, sensitive Polish boy, who came into English sea life with all his fine illusions, only to be thoroughly disillusioned before he was done, is venting his bitterness in his fiction.

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Most of Conrad's stories have a sea background rather than a sea setting. His book of wonderful essays, "Mirror of the Sea," is three-quarters made up of inshore or along-shore, river and harbor backdrops—still scenes. He is champion of the writers of all time in painting still sea scenes. Take this as a sample of a quiet night at sea:

"On clear evenings the silent ship, under the cold sheen of the dead moon, took on the blase aspect of passionless repose resembling the winter of the earth. Foot-steps echoed on her quiet decks. The moonlight clung to her like a frosted mist, and the white sails stood out in dazzling cones as of stainless snow. In the magnificence of the phantom rays the ship appeared pure like a vision of ideal beauty, illusive like a tender dream of serene peace. And nothing in her was real, nothing was distinct and solid, but the heavy shadows that filled her decks with their unceasing and noiseless stir."

Take this livelier one of a stormy day in harbor:

"The gale had freshened since noon, stopping the traffic on the river, and now blew with the strength of a hurricane in fitful bursts that boomed like salvos of great guns firing over the ocean. The rain slanted in sheets that flicked and subsided, and between whiles Jim had threatening glimpses of the tumbling tide, the small craft jumbled and tossing along the shore, the motionless buildings in the driving mist, the broad ferry boats pitching ponder-

ously at anchor, the vast landing stages heaving up and down and smothered in sprays. The next gust seemed to blow all this away. The air was full of flying water. There was a fierce purpose in the gale, a furious earnestness in the screech of the wind, in the brutal tumult of earth and sky."

There is a great descriptive writing. He was not so good with the rough stuff in open water. I say that with "The Typhoon" and "Nigger of the Narcissus" clearly in mind. There is too much note book in them. A little of the note book goes all right, as in that harbor scene quoted above, but for a long go it is not so good. The brain grows numb and weary, the final impression is of confusion, a blur of too many little impressions. What most men I know tell me they recall of the storm in "The Typhoon" is the picture of the busted chest of silver dollars down between decks and the Chinese passengers scrambling after them; which should not be, not in a story of a storm where so many pages, chapters, have been used up in telling of how the men up on the bridge have been battling.

Conrad must have written that storm thing in many sittings, with his thesaurus, his books of synonyms and antonyms handy to him. He sat there, day after day, straining his memory to recall every little thing that could happen, that might have happened in a battle with wind and water. A mistake. A dozen salient sentences are worth chapters of small detail in a story of action. It is so that real men of action describe a stirring happening.

This comment on "The Typhoon" goes also for the *Narcissus* tale, wherein we have page after page, chapters of pages—of the minutest notes, of how the old hooker behaved while she is hove down! also how the sea behaved and how the sun behaved—rising and setting.

We are given word pictures from a dozen angles, photographic little snapshots without end of every little incident. There is no sweeping onward rush of narration, nothing akin to the nature of the sea itself, which never still, always moving, restless, tumultuous, is forever demanding a fast-moving, powerful style for effective reproduction.

Conrad is a born writer, but not a born story teller. The

first and last duty of a story teller is to tell the story, not to seize the chance to tell everything he ever knew. Moral and philosophic reflections are all very fine, but an essay not a story is the best place for them. Almost any writer with intelligence enough to tell a good story carries in his brain a thousand fine ideas on many a theme, tempting things to let the world know he knows; but as a good story teller he leaves them out. The story tellers who have lived through the ages never forgot the story.

Throughout all his books Conrad fails to seize at once upon the salient thing, the essential thing, seize upon it and hold it and let the non-essential fade out. Even if he had that faculty originally, the super-literary school which shaped his methods would have killed it in him. He probably never did have it. He surely never did have the big stroke, the power to synthesize after long analysis, or after no analysis at all; the power to summarize in a single blinding, overwhelming sentence the essence of a thousand detailed doings: all of which can be condensed into the phrase—he did not have the dramatic instinct.

Nevertheless, without being a dramatist or natural story teller, Conrad was amazing. He was a student of human nature. All writers are such, of course. It is part of their trade, but he was a most profound one. How he could skewer a four-flusher! Yet what pity he had too! He could plumb the troubled soul to its uttermost depths, ferret out the most secret things of mind and heart, shameful enough things at times, but never with any gloating over his discoveries. He had understanding and sympathy, and because he had, he has charity for the erring. He had native goodness, and because he had, he could write of utter evil without corroding his pen with the taint of their abominations. That last quality in itself sets him apart from all his esthetic contemporaries.

He was a bit of a feminist. A super-sensitiveness rarely given to a masculine nature helped him to understand women as few of them understood themselves. He has drawn for us one class of women, the primitive half-caste of the East, as no man before him ever did. Some have wondered how near to truth he got with them. Who may say without knowing them? Or, knowing them, and not possessing Conrad's intuitions, is able to say? At least

he has made them live for us, and made them live in exquisite English?

Conrad was better at depicting intelligent, attractive women than the full-powered men who were also good men. He gives us nowhere a full-sized hero. Peyrol of "The Rover" came near to it in his old age, but there was the old fellow's lawless youth to mar the full record. Even allowing for Nostromo's early lapses, we find him slipping when the big test comes. Perhaps it is too much to ask Conrad to breathe the air he did for the almost entire part of his life and expect him then to paint the flawless hero. After all, even the born romance writer must have something near him in life to inspire him or he will fail to paint convincingly the knight without fear and without reproach.

Conrad had it in him to be one of the essayists of all time. (There are those who think that his "Mirror of the Sea" will outlast all his fiction.) He would also have made a good priest, if started that way in time, or a great medical man—a nerve specialist. Most of these celebrated psycho-analysts are crude amateurs beside him. An unsurpassed essayist he was, but the times, if a man would make a living, demanded fiction. And so he wrote fiction. The most beautiful prose fiction of all English literature.

Color, rhythm, sheer beauty is his. Listen to this from "Youth":

. . . a high outline of mountains, blue and afar in the morning; like faint mist at noon; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand, the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odors and blossoms, of aromatic wood, comes out of the still night, the first sigh of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable, an enslaving-like charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight.

No dynamic, knock-out punch was his, but he surely could make magic with his pen.

This article has been an attempt thus far within a brief, allotted space to give an idea of the sort of stuff he

wrote. For myself, I have always been almost as curious to know how a champion came by his power as to read the record of his achievements.

There is doubtless a widely accepted notion that a genius is a sort of abnormal creature, a freak like a three-legged man or a two-tailed horse. No genius is a freak. He is the legitimate child of his ancestry, his times and environment. His power is prenatal. The thing that counts most in the make-up of any wonder man is the thing that he should not proudly take to his credit, the thing that is born in him. "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children." Quite so, Gospel truth; but likewise the virtues of the father (and the mother). Conrad never forgot this influence in his life. In his "Personal Record" he says:

That which in their grown-up years (he is speaking of his children) may appear to the world about them the most enigmatical side of their natures and perhaps must remain forever obscure even to themselves, will be their unconscious response to the still voice of that inexorable past from which his work of fiction and their personal qualities are remotely derived.

Conrad knew what he owed to his past. Reviewers stress his marvelous command of English. If he had only that, who could be caring for him? He had much more than that.

He had a great heritage. He was a Polish boy and he was a Catholic boy. The history of Poland is like a shorter history of persecuted Ireland. Russia over-rode Poland for less than two centuries. Her religious oppression in Poland was never anything like so ruthless as England's in Ireland, but the persecution was long enough and severe enough to stamp those who fought it with a spiritual distinction. The descendants of a people who prefer suffering to submission are most likely to reap an inheritance of poverty and, it may be, of social eclipse; but also theirs is a heritage of sympathy and understanding, of tenderness and tolerance, they having learned in bitter days what such things mean. Heroic endurance and a passion for freedom are also theirs.

Conrad came of gentle, educated folk, who once owned their broad acres and came also to know what Siberian exile was. To endure injustice and hardship is to be in

the way of learning what we can never learn in easy living. People do not reveal themselves truly to the prosperous and important. The Poles come naturally, even as the Catholic Irish come naturally, by their insight into human nature; and insight into human nature is a writer's greatest gift. Some few esthetic cotemporaries of Conrad had an almost equal flair for precious words and phrases, but that much more precious thing could never be theirs. They were not born right.

The advantage of superior race, the moral balance and openmindedness which should be every Catholic's, were Conrad's in the beginning: and imagination, which, truly enough, must be born in a man, but which is more surely nurtured in the Catholic Church than elsewhere—what is more surely the product of ancient culture than imagination?—add it all up, and we have the great psychologist, great artist, great prose writer, supreme master of all the prose masters of English literature.

The death of this last great artist suggests a thought. The supreme artists of modern Christian times—Dante, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Shakespeare—were Catholics. Doesn't a man have to be brought up in the Catholic faith to be the supreme artist?

Whatever Conrad's reputation may be, his true worth cannot be taken from him. Surely not, but how can his worth be made to count if no one knows anything about him? The second-rate has been made to flourish and the first-rate to wither before this in American literature. I am looking at the books of two writers of sea stuff on a stand beside me as I set down this sentence. Both were New England men and both lived in the good old days when the parsons pretty well told everybody what was what. Dana, who wrote "Two Years Before the Mast," played up to the great majorities and so is now known to all of us: Herman Melville, who feared nobody or no thing, not even diminished reputation, a much better writer and bigger man, is hardly known. Students of English, professional writers know him, but who else to any extent?

However, there is always the eternal hope in the human breast that the best will ultimately emerge. Some day the wielders of bludgeons may forget that Conrad was a

Catholic, or some authority may arise who will prove that he came of an ancient Kentish family. Whurrup! up will his name go then. Until then let us hope for the best.

Conrad the Catholic

A. HILLIARD ATTERIDGE

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JOSEPH CONRAD was the son of a well-to-do Catholic family in southern Poland. His home was a country house in which there was a tradition of literary culture, and his father had published Polish translations of several of Shakespeare's plays. As soon as he could read, his son became an omnivorous devourer of books and soon began to dream of life as an explorer of strange lands. Then came the longing to sail the sea, and later the definite ambition some day to command an English ship. . . .

Yes, Conrad was a son of Catholic Poland. He had grown up in a Catholic home. As a boy in Poland and at Vologda, and a young student at Cracow, he had practised the religion of his baptism, but in the long years of his life on the sea and in strange far-off lands its practice had ceased to be part of his life. When this happens the teaching of the Church ceases to be the constant inspiration of a man's ideals, and a refuge from the perplexities and troubles of life. Many of those who "go down to the sea in ships" suffer this loss. . . .

Many English newspapers wrote of him as "a great Catholic novelist." One might more accurately say that he was a professed Catholic who wrote great novels, just as it has been truly said of Marion Crawford that might better be described as a Catholic who wrote novels, than as a Catholic novelist. . . .

So too, Conrad's novels had nothing distinctively Catholic in them. No doubt the Catholic instinct derived from his early years inspired something of the manly idealism of his works, and was a safeguard against that

toying with evil and treating the moral law as a convention that adulterates so much of current fiction with a subtle poison. Some of the Catholic characters in his stories are very poor and even despicable creatures. This in itself would be not so open to criticism—for there are bad as well as good Catholics—but unfortunately one may doubt if anywhere he describes a Catholic in his novels as in any way influenced for good by his Faith. Still it would be unfair to describe his work as even anti-Catholic. All one can say is that he does not write from a distinctly Catholic standpoint. There is nothing in his books to indicate that he held the Catholic Faith.

It was unfortunate that in the closing years of his long life he was not brought again under Catholic influences. He had made his home in England, at the village of Bishopsbourne in Kent. It stands in beautiful surroundings on the long slopes that rise to the heights of Barham Downs. Its church, built in the days when all England was Catholic, has been in Protestant hands for three and a half centuries, and there is no Catholic Church nearer than Canterbury, five miles away. We have as yet very few churches in these rural districts of Kent.

Conrad, so far as it is known, never visited the church at Canterbury, or came into touch with its clergy. He was ill for some time before his death, but apparently did not realize that it was a serious illness. As often happens in such cases the end came suddenly. He died on the morning of Sunday, August 3.

A message was sent to the parish priest at Canterbury, but when he reached Bishopsbourne, Conrad had been dead for more than an hour. His wife (a non-Catholic) and his two sons, Boris and John, both told Father Sheppard that he had died a professed Catholic, asked that there should be a Requiem Mass and a burial with Catholic rites, and assured the priest that this was what Conrad himself would certainly have desired. It was sad that he should have passed away without the help of the Sacraments, but we may hope that, sudden as was the end, in those last moments his thoughts went back to the Faith of his early days, and even if there was no prayer with his dying lips his heart made its appeal to God.

Four days later, on August 7, his coffin was laid before

the altar of St. Thomas Becket's Church at Canterbury, and the Requiem was said in the presence of a congregation in which Catholic and non-Catholic knelt together—Catholics in prayer for the departed; non-Catholics honoring his memory and paying their tribute to his friendship. Count Krazinski and another member of the Polish Legation were present as the representatives of his native land.